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THE TIME OF THE END UNCERTAIN.

"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power."—Acts i., 6, 7.

MANKIND are naturally disposed to pry into those future events in which they may by any possibility be concerned. Such a disposition, even when there are no grave reasons to justify its indulgence, is yet almost universal, under the name of curiosity. Some of those events, however, obviously depend, in part, for their occurrence, on the ignorance of the persons who are to be affected by them, and yet more of those who are to have some agency in bringing them about; and in such cases we cannot conceive of the desired foreknowledge being obtained, and at the same time the events to which it relates remaining unaffected. For this, and for other reasons, men are kept in ignorance of the greater part of those things which yet they desire to foreknow. They live on, with a veil before them, which their utmost endeavors cannot remove, which no art of theirs can penetrate. But it is not less plainly expedient for them to be assured of other things in which they are to be concerned. For the better discharge of their present duties, they need such instruction, warning, and encouragement, as can be drawn only from coming events. It seems to be a prerogative of man, in distinction from inferior creatures, that, to a considerable extent, he may anticipate what will be from reflecting on what has been, and is capable of receiving information, through various modes, as to events the most remote, whether in past or future time, and the most foreign to his personal experience. We have both capacity and occasion for some measure of this knowledge. These several facts are recognized in the Bible. In adaptation to human wants, it is a revelation of futurity; yet a partial revelation. Many things it discloses, many more things it leaves hidden as before. It predicts the most momentous events in time and in eternity; but there are numberless questions respecting those events, on which it baffles all human curiosity.

An illustration of this thought is found in the words of our Savior, to which I turn your attention at this time. They relate to an event whose certainty is important to be known, and is therefore revealed, though its nature seems to have been but imperfectly apprehended by the inquirers on this occasion, and need not be now precisely ascertained. The information that was sought concerning it, was withheld. And in connection with these words, my object now is to show, that it does not belong to us to foreknow the time of the end of this present dispensation, or order of things, or the time when the glorious reign of Christ will be introduced, or the time of his second coming. *The time of the end is to us uncertain.* Before considering the language of the text, as it was addressed to the apostles, I wish to separate the doctrine to be maintained, from some other questions with which it is commonly connected, and to suggest some preliminary observations in its favor.

The future triumph of Christ's kingdom on the earth, is an event about which, as thus described, there is a general agreement among all who receive the Scriptures. But whether he will then reign on the earth in person, or only through his Spirit and his truth; whether his reign will be introduced by the extermination of his enemies, the resurrection of some or all of the righteous dead, and the renovation of the globe by fire, or will precede these changes; whether the Israel of God will then be his ancient people restored to their own land, in harmony with believing Gentiles, yet with some pre-eminence, or only a spiritual Israel, without any such distinction; whether the thousand years mentioned in the 20th chap. of John's Revelations, will precede or follow Christ's second advent, or are past already:—these are questions now agitated with some zeal; but these I do not here touch, and I wish you to keep them distinct from the point before us. That point is simply our knowledge or our ignorance of the time or season when this dispensation will end, or when the glorious reign of Christ on earth will commence,—whatever views we may entertain of the event itself. I am not to show that it will not take place at any particular time, whether in the next century, or next spring, or to-morrow; but only that we do not know when. And here I will find no fault with any who choose to say that the time is not a great way off. If you believe it is comparatively near, or near when the interval is measured on the scale of all time, so far as this we may be all agreed. It is more than 1800 years nearer than when the apostles inquired about it. It may be possible to know something of its approach. There may be reasons for expecting it within one or two centuries. Our Savior did not proscribe such inquiries nor such conclusions. But when men confidently predict that it will come within the life of this generation—that it will come next year, and even in this or that month in the year,—I am sure they speak unwarrantably. For aught they know, it may come a month after the present, or a century after the present. We may reply, in a legitimate application of our Savior's words, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power."

That it is not for us to foreknow the time when this dispensation will end, or Christ's glorious reign on earth will begin, I argue—

I. *From the analogy to be found in other great events under the government of God, and especially the event of death.*

If it be found that in administering his government over this world, God has often revealed the certainty of great events, yet commonly concealed their dates, we would properly expect to find the same thing true as to the most signal deliverances of his people, or judgments against his enemies, yet to be experienced. Turn, then, to these two classes of events already recorded.

God revealed to Noah his purpose to deluge the earth, and to save him only with his family from among mankind; and with this announcement, the patriarch received minute directions for the building of the ark. Yet it does not appear that the precise time was revealed even to Noah;* or, if we suppose it to have been revealed to him, as needful in view of all he had to do, still it does not appear to have been made known to others. Again, when Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed, the hour was not foretold; and we know not how much time elapsed between the first announcement, and the visit of the two angels, which was the evening before they hastened away Lot. Again, when the descendants of Jacob were to endure a cruel bondage in Egypt, they were not told when it would begin, nor how long it would continue, for that servitude lay between the death of Joseph and their departure under Moses, about 144 years, and was therefore only a part of the time indicated in the prediction to Abraham and other passages; while yet the prediction gave them a right to expect deliverance; and the time of the event was revealed to them by its accomplishment. When at length they began their march through the wilderness, they could not learn how long it would continue; and in the same ignorance they remained, probably not far from two years, till by their murmurings they both incurred and learned the measure of their wanderings. (Numb. xiv., 33.) They looked for the land God had promised to their fathers, but were not told how soon they would possess it. Through the whole history of that people, we find predicted, from time to time, the glories and the calamities that were before them, and we see the events held up, but, with few exceptions, the dates concealed. Their captivities, while threatened before their approach, and understood to be limited according to the tenor of the ancient covenant, were of unknown dates, so far as I have

* Some understand Gen. vi., 3, "his days shall be an hundred and twenty years," of the interval predicted to the Flood. But how could that be possible, when Noah's three sons were living and probably married at the time of the prediction, yet were born after he was five hundred years old, and therefore were not over one hundred years old at the Flood, which was in his six hundredth year? Compare Gen. v. 32; vi., 3, 18; vii., 11. If any suppose there is a mention in the *New Testament* of one hundred and twenty years, as the time of the building of the ark, let them find it. Another view of the passage, perhaps more common, and clear of this difficulty, refers it to the reduced age of mankind. The reader may observe, an infidel cavil is set aside if the ark was not so long in building.

observed, with the exception of the seventy years in Babylon, foretold by Jeremiah. Nor do we anywhere find the period determined for the greatest event predicted in their history up to their dispersion, that is, the coming of their Messiah, except in Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks. The promise of a Redeemer we trace back to the very scene of the first transgression; but nearly fifty recorded generations, more than a hundred such as we reckon now, or about three thousand five hundred years, followed the transgressors before the time of his first coming could be even conjectured. The same uncertainty of course pertained to all those fortunes of the Jewish people, which were to be connected with that event. And the same may in general be said of the predictions of our Savior and his apostles. It will not be denied that such has been the ordinary method of God in his communications to mankind,—to make known great events before their occurrence, yet conceal their times and seasons. Though exceptions may be found in the case of individuals who could not properly avail themselves of a prediction without knowing the season of its fulfilment, yet his ordinary method is plainly such as I have stated. And hence we would expect a similar procedure as to the end of the present dispensation, or of the world.

But a more striking analogy is found in the event of death. In some respects it is indeed a very different thing from Christ's glorious coming or reign, but to every individual who has been or will be subjected to it, the one may be said to anticipate the other, as being the end of probation, and the entrance on an unchangeable career of bliss or woe. Now of all events that can befall mankind, none is more certain than this, if the world continues as it has been; yet none is more uncertain as to its date. As in diseases that are known to be fatal, it is yet impossible to foretell the hour of their termination, so, in the midst of health, mortality is an unavoidable, unquestionable fact in every man's natural condition, while God only can predict the hour or year of its occurrence. Why is it that every man knows he must die, yet no man can tell when? For wise reasons God has ordained it thus, in respect to the end of human life? Whatever those reasons may have been, why may they not hold good as to the end of the world? The fact that mankind have always been kept ignorant of the time of an event to them as certain and momentous as any other, would naturally lead us to expect a like uncertainty as to the time of the event we are considering.

Such analogies as these are worthy of our notice. Though they could never be alleged against a clear declaration, if there were one, in the Bible on this subject; yet they ought to be regarded as of weight in bringing us to a right position for ascertaining the truth by the aid of the Bible, especially when its testimony is capable of more than one interpretation. Let us remember, therefore, when men presume to tell us the date of the end, as a thing revealed to their eyes, that *such has not been the way of God* in his providence, or in his word.

II. *From the fact that such knowledge, on the part of men, does not seem desirable.*

Of course I admit that this consideration, like the last, could not stand against any clear declaration of the Bible; but it has its place on a question which the Bible does not explicitly determine beyond all suspense or doubt. It is a kind of argument which the uninspired "minor prophets" of our day are willing to employ when it suits their purpose. It will have an influence in our decision on many questions. And it has a legitimate influence to this extent, that if a proposed doctrine is in itself repugnant to our sober convictions of what is on the whole desirable, we have a right to insist the more on clear testimony in its behalf, before consenting to receive it; on something better than plausible conjectures and shadowy probabilities. Consider then whether, so far as we can judge, it would be for the best that men should foreknow the time when the present course of things will end. The inquiry is not as to the *event* itself, whenever it may take place; but as to the *foreknowledge* of its *time*: whether, desirable as the consummation must be on the whole, it would have been pleasant to good men, and salutary to the world, that its date should be disclosed.

Supposing the event in question to be the commencement of Christ's spiritual reign on the earth, or the universal prevalence of holiness; does it seem desirable that the date of it should have been revealed to mankind? If, on the one hand, that time be yet remote, it could not gratify nor animate us to know how long the world must wait for such a blessing; and, whenever the time may come, to the successive generations before us it was remote, inasmuch as it has not come yet, and to foreknow that it would be deferred so long, we cannot think would have been to them either a pleasure or a benefit. Yet if it is really indicated, as some contend, in the prophetic numbers, it has been discoverable there, in all its remoteness, for many centuries. If, on the other hand, it be near, the prospect might indeed be to us delightful; but we are only a small part of all who have lived, and we cannot pronounce that knowledge on the whole desirable, which must have deferred their hope, merely because it would hasten ours. There is reason also to fear that such a prospect, however pleasing, might now enervate instead of invigorating the hearts of good men; as the near prospect of success in any enterprise, where men have a part, often relaxes their vigilance and activity, more than all the difficulties and delays they have encountered.

Supposing, however, the time in question to be not merely the commencement of prevailing holiness on earth, but Christ's personal coming to raise the righteous dead and destroy his foes—which is the view of those who are most confident on this subject;—the foreknowledge of it must then appear still less desirable. Make the supposition, that God has purposed the event shall take place in the next century. Would it be best for the world to know that it will not come before? Yet if God had revealed it in his word, then, wherever that word has been read in ages past, the righteous might have been made to des-

pond, and the wicked to exult, in the prospect. Or make the supposition, that God has purposed the event shall take place the next year. Do you rejoice in believing that probation will cease while not more than a fragment of the whole adult human family will have been saved, rather than in believing that it will continue for an indefinite period, during which, by the greater spread and prevalence of the Gospel, the number of the saved may, on the whole scale of time, come to exceed that of the lost? If indeed this were known to be God's plan, his people would acquiesce; but if there is room for hesitating whether he has revealed it, benevolence would naturally dictate, at least while many things related to it remain obscure as now, that we leave the matter in suspense. But, looking at the supposed event by itself, and not as compared with universal holiness preceding it, would the foreknowledge of it, as so soon to arrive, be pleasant and profitable to good men? "It must be pleasant to a Christian," say some, "because he will so soon see his Savior." But this may be said of death also, and this was the reason Paul gave for desiring death—not for desiring the end of the world,—“having a desire to depart and to be with Christ,” counting it “gain to die,” though to him “to live” was “Christ.” Yet surely every Christian is not of course eager to die. On the contrary, this world is desirable for him during his allotted time, and Christ's intercession for his followers was, “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.” Because the vision of Christ itself appears inviting, whether by means of death or of his personal coming, we cannot infer that either event would make his people happy at any other than the appointed time, and still less that it would be desirable for them to foreknow that time. Again, we are told, “it must be pleasant to be among the living when Christ appears, and thus escape corruption.” But says Paul, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed;” and you know not what violence there may be in this “change,” since it must in some way answer to that death which has “passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” But if, so far as you are concerned, the prospect were all pleasure, would it overcome all your regard for others whom it threatens with imminent destruction? When Paul says it would be far better for him to depart and be with Christ than to live, he adds, “nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you;” and if you have his spirit, you will not care less for those who are to be destroyed when you are saved, than he cared for those whom he would leave in a world of mercy if he were taken away. And apart from your pleasure, would the prospect be, on the whole, an advantage to you, or an injury, in the work of doing good? And would it have a salutary influence on the minds and habits and interests of mankind? Remember that the same revealed fact, if it should prove an advantage to the present generation by nearly concerning them, would have operated unfavorably on past generations by concerning them remotely. But waiving that point: in answering this question, turn

again to the illustration drawn from death. That arrangement of Providence by which all men are made certain of the fact, yet ignorant of its date, we cannot doubt is a beneficent arrangement. And one reason for it, is doubtless this; that while men obviously need the restraint imposed by the certainty of the event, if they knew it to be remote, they would disregard it far more than now; and if, on the other hand, they knew it to be very near, it would unfit them for the common duties of life, and make even their preparation for eternity more confused and precarious than now. Let a man become possessed with the notion that he has but a little while to live: and we find, that though not yet disabled by sickness, he is in a great measure disqualified for his ordinary worldly duties, for the industry and enterprise that are proper to his condition in this world; and his attention is likely to be diverted from the interests of others, public and private, to his own personal fears. In the affairs of religion, too, he is exposed to an undue predominance of selfish alarm among his governing motives, and hence to hasty and delusive impressions; so that cases of conviction and conversion on what is supposed to be the bed of death, are regarded by all experienced observers with great distrust, not only from their general knowledge of human infirmity, but from the too frequent issue of like appearances in cases of unexpected recovery. Hence, when such an expectation extensively prevails, as under the approach of some fatal pestilence, the religious impressions witnessed are far less relied on than at other times. It is not from terror pervading the public mind, that we ever look for revivals of religion, if even for a solitary conversion. Now would we not apprehend the same questionable influence, in a community that should know themselves to be living in the last month or year of the world? If the prospect of impending death incapacitates a man for the common business of life, even though he expects that others, dependent on him, will reap benefit from his present exertions, much more would he be affected by the approach of a catastrophe that should overwhelm all alike. And if, besides merely physical causes, the fear of death is apt to make those religious appearances that begin in the last hours of life, delusive, the fear of an event still more awful must tend to similar delusion. The conversions that might seem to be wrought under the power of such an expectation, would be for that reason, to say the least, liable to a just suspicion. At various periods men have been made to believe that the day of judgment was at hand, and some were seemingly brought to repentance; but are those the seasons most distinguished by the "fruits meet for repentance?" If now the same belief is said to multiply conversions, wise men will doubt it till time tests both the cause and the effect. That very influence on account of which some might choose this expectation should prevail—its effect on careless men of the world—might bring more evil than good. And a still more obvious effect would be, to divert the activity and to derange the common business and interests of mankind. As we can see it to be best for man that he should not foreknow the time of his death, though the event is certain, so it would appear to be best for

him, and for similar reasons, that he should not foreknow the time of the end of the world. And as God has left him ignorant in the one case, so it might be presumed God would leave him ignorant in the other. But the Christian philanthropist might suffer an injury from foreseeing the end of the world at hand, which he would not suffer from foreseeing his own. Would he pray and exert himself, as many have done, for the diffusion of the gospel, or for the salvation of mankind, if he knew that before it can be carried round the globe, the globe itself, with its whole unconverted population, will be wrapt in flames? We need not ask how it would be; for is it not found, that they who now cherish such an expectation, abandon that which they before cherished of the conversion of the heathen, and withhold from them accordingly their prayers and charities? They wait now for God to give his Son "the heathen for his inheritance"—not, as in the consecrated petition of the church, for his "portion," as "his people" are, but that he may "dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel!" Might we not presume that a foreknowledge which would bring to an end all the beneficent operations of God's people in behalf of a surrounding world, God in his mercy, not only to the world but to his people, would withhold? The great interests of benevolence between man and man, seem thus to make such knowledge undesirable, as being rather pernicious than salutary in its tendency.

So far, therefore, as we can judge, it does not appear desirable that men should foreknow when the present state of things will end, whether we suppose that event to be near or remote; not even if it be only the commencement of a reign of holiness, and far less if it be the end of probation. I do not speak now of the more unhappy consequences of believing the end of all things to be near, through a mistaken interpretation of the Bible, and then finding the expectation vain—though I fear much mischief of that kind will yet be witnessed, as it has been before: but supposing the event to be really near, we find reasons why its date should be hidden from mortal eyes. And these reasons, like the analogy before pointed out in respect to other events made known by God, though they could not stand against the clear declarations of his word, if such there were, do naturally affect us, and ought to affect us, in the view we take of those times and seasons which he has not there clearly revealed. Bearing these things in mind, we are brought to the question of fact, whether God has clearly revealed the time when this present dispensation will end. That we do not foreknow it, I argue

III. *From the uncertainty attending the interpretation of the Scriptures on this subject.*

Of course, within my present limits, I cannot minutely comment on the passages which have been the occasion of so much controversy. My object now is to remind you of what I should think no candid and enlightened student of the Bible could refuse to confess, the manifold difficulty of ascertaining the time in question, from the passages that are supposed to reveal it, if it is anywhere revealed.

Adverting now only to the prophecy of Daniel : consider the pains bestowed on its interpretation with reference to this question, and the perplexity and confusion that have the more prevailed among its interpreters. From age to age, pious and learned men have pored over its pages, yet what endless diversity, what total repugnance, in their conclusions. It is strange that men who know the history of prophetic interpretation, can rely on their own with all the confidence they wonder at in their predecessors. And nothing in this book is more open to diversity of interpretation, than the indication of time. It must be made out by a comparison of several particulars, each of which is matter of dispute. Any conclusion as to the precise time when the present state of things will terminate, must rest on the decision of several subordinate questions, and partake of the uncertainty belonging to each and all of those questions. I can only name some of them here. Whether the kingdom signified by the "fourth beast" in the 7th chapter was the Roman empire or not, is a matter of doubt. If it was, there is still more difficulty in determining what were the "ten horns" or kingdoms, that arose from it. Nor is it clearly proved that the "little horn" or kingdom, which afterwards came up among them and subdued three of them, was the papal power, rather than Antiochus Epiphanes ; indeed this interpretation is comparatively modern, and not universal even among Protestants. If it was the papal power, and if the "time and times and the dividing of time," during which the saints were to be "given into his hand," signified 1260 years, it is more than difficult, it is impossible, to determine positively when that power began ; for instead of dating, as some suppose, from A.D. 538, the pope gained ecclesiastical superiority long before that period, and did not become a temporal prince till long after it, and therefore several dates are nearer the truth than this : nor can the end be foreknown from the duration of his sway, until its beginning is ascertained. Again : it is left exceedingly doubtful who was meant by the "little horn," in the 8th chapter. It came from one of the four that rose up in the place of the great horn, which signified Alexander, whose empire was divided into four parts after his death ; and this king or power, springing from one of those divisions, has been most generally understood to signify Antiochus.* That the Roman power, whether pagan or papal, is signified by it, I take to be a modern and certainly doubtful theory. Then, as to the 2300 days, which were to elapse before the sanctuary should be cleansed : it has never been proved that those *days* signified *years*, and so long as there is nothing said in this book to that effect, it cannot be proved by two or three instances of some such usage in other books where the context requires it. Indeed, so far as the language is considered, the argument is in favor of their being literal or natural days. And as such, they allow the plausible application they have generally

* Bishop Newton, though he prefers another view, admits that "this little horn is by the generality of interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, ancient and modern, supposed to mean Antiochus Epiphanes, king of Syria, who was a great enemy and cruel persecutor of the Jews."—*Diss. on Proph.*, 15.

received to Antiochus. If they were years, it does not appear that they were of the same length in the chronology then used among the Jews, as in our own; nor, if they were, can it be shown from what point they were computed; for to make them include, as some do, the seventy weeks, or 490 years, mentioned in the 9th chapter, is taking for granted the thing in question. The same may be said of the numbers given in the 12th chapter. It remains to be shown that those *days* meant *years*; and if years were meant, still the date of their beginning remains uncertain, and therefore the date of their ending. And if all this were determined, we are left uncertain as to *what* will happen *when* they terminate.* These instances are enough for our present purpose. Not only have they been all controverted among pious and learned men, but they have given abundant occasion for controversy. They are attended with difficulties and perplexities which, to say the least, leave great room for doubt, and ought to check the confidence of the most capable interpreter. Let it be considered, too, that any conclusion drawn from this prophecy as to the time of the end, will be invalidated by mistaking the truth on any one of these chief questions. They are closely connected among themselves; one stands upon another. For example, if the "fourth beast" in the 7th chapter does not signify the Roman empire, then the little horn that grew from it cannot be the papacy; and if the little horn there or in the 8th chapter be the persecuting king Antiochus, instead of the papacy, then its history was all told, in literal days, long before the Christian era; and of course, if the *days*, in Daniel's usage, do not signify *years*, they have nothing to do with what we now call the time of the end. If, therefore, there is a single item, in the calculations drawn from this source, on which there is room for great uncertainty, the whole chronological argument built upon them is undermined. If there is considerable uncertainty as to two or more items on which the other must rest, the result cannot be relied on, according to any just doctrine of probabilities. But without applying a method that might be thought too rigorous in matters of this kind, the uncertainty I have pointed out is enough to show that the book of Daniel—esteemed the stronghold of prophetic chronology—does not warrant the minute and confident predictions sometimes based upon it, nor authorize us to believe that God intended we should know the precise time of the end. Did this opportunity permit, some similar uncertainty, as to that time, might be pointed out in John's Revelations. If these two prophecies do not teach men, beyond reasonable doubt, when the present dispensation will end, then it is not for men to know that season which the Father hath put in his own power.

IV. *From the ignorance of the apostles—and even of the man Christ Jesus—on this subject.*

* Bishop Newton admits, "Here are then three different periods assigned, 1260, 1290, and 1335 years; and what is the precise time of their beginning and consequently of their ending, as well as what are the great and signal events which will take place at the end of each period, we can only conjecture; time alone can with certainty discover."

As to the apostles, the text is decisive. After our Lord's resurrection, the eleven inquired of him, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" Probably, as I have intimated, their notions of his reign were as yet vague, if not erroneous. Perhaps they retained some such expectations as they had before betrayed, of a worldly kingdom, which he would set up to the subversion of the Roman power and the aggrandizement of the Jewish people; for if these expectations had been discouraged by his violent death, they might easily have revived in view of his glorious resurrection. The nature of his kingdom was not, however, the main subject of this conversation. The question regards the season of its establishment and triumph. And in his answer, he neither confirms nor contradicts their opinions as to its nature, but only meets their question, whether he is about to assume it at this time. On this point he tells them, it is not for them to receive the information they are seeking, or such knowledge does not of right belong to them: the Father hath put in his own power, or determined by his own authority, the times or seasons in which the events he has predicted will take place, and he does not see fit to make known those periods. The answer clearly implies, that our Lord had not then in every sense restored the kingdom to Israel, or that he had not already fulfilled the most glorious predictions regarding the Messiah's kingdom; and that at some future period he would reign, according to those predictions, in the splendor of a triumphant and acknowledged king. But in whatever sense it was true that he would restore the kingdom to Israel, whatever was the glorious reign predicted for the Messiah by the ancient prophets, he here affirmed most pointedly, that it did not belong to his apostles to foreknow the period which God had appointed for it. We are left to apply the declaration, generally, to those great events which had been foretold, and among them to this event of Christ's future reign. The words, "times or seasons," are suited to occurrences more or less definite, the last being the more specific designation of time. Thus, notwithstanding the minute and positive anticipations that are held forth on this subject—and one would think there ought to be no room for doubt in a matter so confidently handled—the apostles were explicitly taught, that it was not for them to know the times or the seasons which the Father had determined.

Accordingly their epistles show, in several places, that neither they, nor the Christians to whom they wrote, foreknew the date of what is called "the day of the Lord." Peter says, it "will come as a thief in the night;" (2 Pet. iii., 10.) that is, suddenly, or without forewarning as to its season. In Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians, immediately after that description of the Lord's descent from heaven which raised such expectations that in his second letter he proposed to allay them, he adds, "But of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you, for yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." (1 Thess. v., 1, 2.) And when he adds, "But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that

day should overtake you as a thief," he does not teach that it would not come suddenly to Christians, but only that since they were enlightened as to the fact that it would so come, it would not injuriously surprise them, because, with such a conviction, they would live in habitual preparation for it; and accordingly he adds again, "Therefore, let us not sleep as do others, but let us watch." The suddenness of the event thus spoken of, can scarcely be ascribed by those who now claim to have ascertained its date, to the unbelief and negligence of the church in those days; for these persons contend that the early Christians held a doctrine like their own on this subject, and were consoled and animated by the conviction in the most trying circumstances. Nor did this language imply that the event was, strictly speaking, near; or if it did, the apostles are shown to have mistaken the time, since it has not yet arrived. In Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians, he would not have them troubled by what he had said before, as though "the day of Christ were at hand," for there was to be "a falling away first;" from which he appears to have been aware of some interval, yet not of its length. The manner in which the apostles spoke of that day, naturally meant, that, for aught they knew, it might then be near, because they knew not whether it was near or distant; and in speaking of it, they lost sight of intervening time. In a word, they knew as little on the subject as we would have expected them to know, from our Lord's answer to their question. Nor can it be said that though destitute of this knowledge at first, they might have acquired it afterwards. To suppose such a thing, is a mere assumption. If this knowledge did not then belong to them, with the prophecies in their hands, what reason have we to suppose that they ever obtained it from the study of those same prophecies, or ever became entitled to it in this world? As if to guard them and us against such an impression, Jesus told them, not merely that they did not know the time, but that it was not for them to know; not only they were without this knowledge, but without any right or title to it.

Now from this undeniable ignorance of the apostles as to the time in question, two things may be inferred—

1. The obscurity already pointed out in the prophecies we have respecting it,—supposing it to be a subject of those prophecies. If Daniel foretold the time, why did they not learn it from that teacher? They were apt pupils of the inspired masters before them, and themselves inspired also for the future guidance of the church. If they did not see the date in Daniel's pages, we may well believe he does not there disclose it. And then the book of Revelations, so often quoted also on this subject, was the work of one of the apostles. Has he taught us what it was not for him to know? If so, we have indeed grown "wiser than our teachers." Can it be thought that an important date is definitely marked, as some would have us believe, in Daniel's prophecy, when the apostles did not there discover it; and in their writings also, when they did not themselves know it?

2. Another inference from their ignorance, is—our own. If it was not

for Christ's chosen disciples to know particularly when his most glorious reign would begin, neither was it for other Christians then. Is it for Christians now? If indeed it is for us, rather than the apostles, to foreknow that season, we must learn it from one or more of these three sources:

First: Can we learn it from Daniel's chronological predictions? But the apostles obtained no such information from that prophet. Yet they had access to his numbers as well as we, and surely they were not less capable of ascertaining the measures of time given to their own nation in their sacred books. Second: Can we learn it from the writings of the apostles themselves? Then they have taught us more than they ever knew. Third: Can we learn it from later developments than the apostles witnessed, under the providence of God? These may, indeed, be otherwise instructive; and no doubt it is possible for us to gather from the succession and concurrence of events, important lessons, partially or wholly unknown to the wisest men of earlier ages, on the subjects of ancient prophecy. The study of events, however, leads us over a vast field of most uncertain conjecture as well as salutary instruction, and therefore must teach us modesty rather than presumption, or else we are taught to no good purpose. But from the nature of the case, past events alone can never determine for us the date of that future event we are contemplating, if they can alone assure us of anything respecting it. And further, when they are employed for this purpose, not alone but in explanation of the prophetic numbers which are supposed to fix the date, observe that these numbers cannot depend upon those events for their significance. The times measured off by the prophets, were described according to some law or usage of human speech; and the prophets and their readers, and the apostles after them, were as capable as ourselves of ascertaining that method. The days enumerated by Daniel were no measure of time, except as they were either literal days, or years; and which of these two they were, the first Jewish readers ought to have known as well as we. But whether the first readers knew it or not, the apostles unquestionably did; for they lived long after the literal days, foretold in some places, had elapsed, and therefore, knowing whether the predicted events had occurred already, they could not fail to know whether those events would occur after the lapse of the literal years. For example, taking the largest number given, the apostles were at least as capable as ourselves of knowing what event was to take place after the 2300 days, announced in the 8th chapter of Daniel, and the point from which they were computed; they were at least as capable of knowing whether that event had happened in as many days; and knowing this, they knew whether it would happen in as many years. Thus, if that event was the one we have in view, they could learn its season from the prophetic number as well as we. Such knowledge, therefore, did not depend on the observation of subsequent events. In truth, it was to be obtained, not from "leadings of Providence," but from processes of arithmetic. Notwithstanding the later developments we witness, the ignorance of the apostles

on this point should lead us to infer our own.—If we have not learned the season in question by these means, we have not learned it at all. It remains as true of Christians and of all men now, as though Christ had addressed himself to them originally: it is not for them to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in his own power.

But as if to leave no doubt on this matter—as if to include his apostles and all his followers, and even his own humanity, behind the same veil of uncertainty—Christ has left us, along with the declaration in the text, another which must not here be overlooked. In the 24th chapter of Matthew, in reply to the question of his disciples, “What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” after several predictions, he adds, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man; no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only;” and in the parallel passage in Mark’s gospel (xiii., 32.) he adds again, “Neither the Son.” Now, whatever may be the event referred to in that chapter, whether the destruction of Jerusalem, or the day of judgment, or the one as shadowing forth the other; its time or season the Father had determined, and the Father only knew. That we may understand here, by the word *day*, a season, and not literally a day, is rather warranted than forbidden by the preceding illustration of the fig tree; the summer, mentioned, corresponding to our whole warm season of spring and summer,* and giving signs of its nearness only as it came on, in the putting forth of the leaves. Now, even if the event which would come thus suddenly, was only the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place within forty years; can we suppose its date to have been so hidden from men and angels, and the man Christ Jesus, and at the same time suppose the humblest modern disciple to foreknow the date of an event far more remote and improbable? If, on the other hand, his coming was the very event in question, who now has that knowledge of it which he disclaimed for all creatures and for himself? I can scarcely bear to notice the comment by which some would evade this passage—that “though we cannot know the hour or the day, we may know the year.”† It is a childish play on words, unworthy alike of good sense and reverent piety. This declaration of our Lord, if there were no other, should be enough to show us that the time of the end is to us uncertain.

V. *From the mistakes that have been made on this subject.*

They could hardly be enumerated in a whole discourse. A just account of them would make an interesting and profitable volume. Besides the diversity that has existed, and still exists, in the confident opinions of good men as to the prophecies which are not yet fulfilled, many others have been no less confidently maintained till time demonstrated their falseness. The “fifth monarchy men,” as they were called, in the reign of the Puritans in England, are only one well-known example of the delusion to which good men are exposed in the interpretation of

* Robinson’s Lex.

† It might be a fair set-off against such a comment, if we were to take the same liberty with *day* in this passage, that some take with it in the prophecies, and argue that we cannot know in what thousand years the end will come.

prophecy. They believed the time indicated by Daniel was at hand, and they were "the people of the saints of the Most High," to whom "the greatness of the kingdom" was about to be given; and nothing but time vanquished their delusion. Some similar delusions have flourished and faded away, in almost every age and country, if not all equally conspicuous. A strange sect is apt to plant itself on a mistaken interpretation of prophecy, till overturned by time. It has been a favorite weapon both of impostors and enthusiasts. And no application of prophecy has more often proved delusive than the attempt to ascertain the dates of predicted events, especially of the end of the world. It is no new thing for men to affirm, on the authority of the Bible, that the day of judgment is literally at hand; and it will be no new thing, if time compels them to confess their mistake and regret their presumption.

But let it be more particularly noticed, that they who now predict the precise time of the end, are already proved to be mistaken as to the events which they say are to precede it. The papal power, in their scheme, was to be broken in A.D. 1798, but the papacy was not broken then; to break it, requires more than the imprisonment of the pope; and not only is it still a persecuting power, but in many respects stronger since the French Revolution than before, and on the increase, we are told, in such Protestant strongholds as England and this country. Again: they say the Turkish power was to be broken in the summer of A.D. 1840, and for the result they refer to the interference of the Allied Powers, at that time, in the political affairs of Turkey. But Turkish independence no more ceased then, than French independence ceased, when the same Allied Powers did more violence to France, invading her capital, and giving her one monarch in the place of another. And when our missionaries are quoted as saying that the Ottoman strength is waning, it is no doubt true, but as much has been true for many years, especially since the Greek Revolution. Once more: according to the same scheme, the gospel would have been by this time published among all nations, unless that work is to be done in a few months, which I believe is not expected. But in the looser sense of this language, as long ago as the days of Paul the gospel was preached "in all the world," "to every creature which is under heaven," (Col. i. 6, 23.); and in that sense it was not the sign supposed; while in the stricter construction, the prediction is not yet fulfilled, and in that sense the supposed sign fails. Not to dwell on other instances: if time already disproves a theory, as to these preliminary events, can the same theory be trusted as to the end? And how can men be instructed, if in spite of mistakes already demonstrated, they will have it that they are "the wise," who "understand?" Even if the Providence of God should teach us nothing more, let us learn from it at least our present ignorance of the time of the end.

I leave the subject before you with two reflections.

If it is not for us to know the times or the seasons, *we shall do well not to agitate questions of this nature.* If such knowledge does not belong to us, neither is it our business to seek such know-

ledge. The search is not, in every sense, fruitless ; for, in attempting to learn what is not revealed, we can easily form opinions, we are likely to embrace theories, which must only take their place sooner or later with the exploded errors of the past. Nor should such a theory be reckoned harmless. This specification of the particular time, especially as being literally near, attracts more attention, and produces a more positive present effect, than all the other doctrines propagated with it. When it fails of fulfilment, the failure must be felt accordingly. A vain expectation, once shown to be such, recoils on him who holds it, and when held in the name of the Bible, it tends to dishonor that book. Precise predictions on this subject cannot be proved true, because the Bible does not authorize them, and therefore they ought not to be encouraged. Nor ought they to be encouraged if they happen to be true : for we cannot know their truth ; God has not communicated such information commonly in other instances, nor yet in this ; and so far as we can judge, it is not desirable for mankind. On this subject, perhaps more than most others, theories confidently maintained, and turning out mistaken, cannot but tend to mischief. Not only their advocates suffer from defeat, but even their opponents from success ; and both suffer from the feverish excitement of such a conflict. Every unauthorized prediction, in proportion to the credit it obtains, wearies and perplexes good men, diverts attention from the fundamental and evident truths of the Gospel to doubtful speculations, encourages restless curiosity in the place of active benevolence, tampers with the credit of all prophecy, and gives a new weapon to the scoffer. If now there are any who would so connect their schemes with the Bible as to make its authority stand or fall with them in the eyes of others, let all who study and revere this book protest against the presumption. If, on the other hand, any are disheartened, as though in these days, under the assaults of misguided zeal, and the fluctuations to which human judgment is ever liable, the faith of the church on this and many other topics, were loosened from all its foundations ; let them remember that this faith has survived fluctuations and assaults greater than all these ; let them " both hope, and quietly wait, for the salvation of the Lord." Amidst moral as well as physical commotions, remember that he knows how to bring good out of evil ; that in regard to the prophecies, as well as other portions of the Bible, " there must be heresies," " that they which are approved may be made manifest ;" that mistakes which are otherwise pernicious, may yet serve to establish sounder principles of interpretation ; that as one prediction after another, concerning the time of the end, is proved to be mistaken, we have new proof that it is not for us to know that time. This divine superintendence we do well to remember, when we witness the haste and confidence of others, crying, " Lo, here !" and " Lo, there !" as though the kingdom of God were coming now " with observation ;" yet let us not join with them in the evil of their experiments, nor wait to be convinced by the result, but rather obey the lesson we have learned from our Lord himself, the lesson con-

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firmed by so many experiments already, that it is not for us to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in his own power.

Finally : *It becomes us to live in habitual readiness for the end of our probation.* Whenever the present dispensation may terminate, and however the glorious reign of Christ may be ushered in, there is a temper of heart and a way of life which may prepare the living for that day, while yet they cannot learn its date ; just as there is a preparation for death, which depends not on any knowledge of its approach. And since, for every individual, probation ends with life, as truly as with the present world's existence, he who is prepared for the end of his own life, is prepared for the end of the world. To live as seeing God, under the influence of things unseen and eternal, in repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, doing good as we have opportunity,—this is the urgent business of us all. To lead us by his Spirit thus to live, is the plan of God, both in what he discloses and in what he conceals. Thus let us be “ looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.” Then, if the day of judgment be ushered in to-morrow, will it come for us too soon ? But without this preparation, though that day should be deferred a thousand years, who among you can be safe ? For aught that appears, all that is left of your probation may not reach to that event whose date you are curious to learn. The trump of the archangel, if it were soon to sound, might reach your ear only in the dust. For you, time, if not near its own end, may yet be measured, not by years, but by months and days. While many have been inquiring when probation will cease, with a great multitude it has ceased already. If I were to tell you who make up this assembly, that death is at your door, according to the common course of God's providence I should speak a momentous truth to some here present. If the same thing had been said, a few weeks since, to the congregations in this city, it would have been a truth not merely to an aged man here and there, already stooping to his grave, but to a group of young men, of whom it was scarcely thought that they could die. Oh, let us be affected, not only by the opening graves, and the rising dead, and the descending Judge, that are yet in prospect, but by the graves now sealed and silent, by their young, unexpected tenants, and by that world of spirits which is already thronged from ours, and seems to overshadow us with their awful presence. My hearer, whatever may be the times or the seasons which the Father hath determined, prepare to meet thy God, in death, in judgment ! Be ready for the bidding, for the presence, of thy Savior and thy Judge !

THE SPIRITUAL SEEDTIME.

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and rain righteousness upon you."—HOSEA x., 12.

"ANOTHER season has just passed away, if we speak in reference to the fruits of the earth; but if we have in view the supply of food for the mind and soul, it is more proper to say that the season has just commenced. The summer brings forward the harvest of the field, but the late autumn and the winter bring the months of reflection, and the richest harvests of the intellect and the soul. Now, therefore, that the sultry days of summer are over, and autumn has come, with its cool and bracing air, its falling leaves, its fading verdure, and the serious and contemplative influence which it breathes over the soul, the question ought to arise with every one, What progress is the Redeemer's kingdom to make in my heart, and in the circle in which I move, during the months which are to come? As the family gathers together once more from the green fields and out-door occupations of summer, to the duties and pleasures of the home and fire-side, what influence, what feelings, what enjoyments are to reign in the re-united circle? Is our community to go on, pervaded by a cold, worldly, irreligious spirit, or is an influence from above to descend, awakening holy joy and peace in these hearts, bringing penitence for sin, ardent love for God, the glow of benevolence, and the delights of prayer and praise? Is the church to remain as it is, or is it to be doubled and trebled during the approaching winter? Is religious feeling in the hearts of its members to continue cold, and formal, and meagre, or is it to be awakened to a warmer glow of gratitude and love, and deeper desire for spiritual blessings, and for more complete and happy union with God?

And you hath he quickened, [that is, brought to life], who were dead in trespasses and sins. Read Eph. ii., 1—10.

"The truth here taught is this:—Man, in his natural state of sin, is morally helpless and dead. When in this condition, God, sometimes, from pure unmerited mercy, takes compassion upon him, and awakens within him, by what is actually called *creation*, a new life,—i. e., new feelings, new desires, new motives of action,—and so directly are these new principles the results of God's agency in the human heart, that the being who possesses them is, with special reference to these holy principles, the very workmanship of God, *created unto good works*, in consequence of a previous determination on the part of his Maker that he should be the subject of such a change.

"The mind which really understands and grasps this passage is overwhelmed with the solemn reflections which cluster around it. What? Is man really, in his natural state, *helpless and dead*, in trespasses and sins? Is there nothing within him which can originate life, no seed in his heart which may, by his own cultivation, spring up and clothe the desert of the natural character with verdure? Is the heart given up

to hopeless abandonment, to be the prey of eternal sin, unless some power from above interposes to save it? There are in our families, our neighborhoods, our congregations, hundreds, in whose bosoms love for God as a controlling principle of action, has not found a place; but principles and passions which God pronounces to be sin, reign there, and hold entire control, though with greater or less degrees of restraint as to their outward exhibition. Now, are these individuals really helpless and hopeless victims to this slavery? Are the circumstances and condition of their hearts such that it is certain, that if left to themselves, they will still go on in sin, continuing for ever under its bondage, and suffering for ever its pains?

"The doctrine that man is not quite dead in sin is the most popular doctrine. We do not mean that any class of evangelical Christians really maintain such an opinion, but our hearts have all a constant tendency to sink insensibly into it. We *lose sight* of the truth, which, when our attention is really called to it, we are compelled to admit and believe. We are always willing to acknowledge that we are sinners, —and even that we are hardened, stupid sinners,—we will admit that we are *asleep*,—that we are in a *lethargy*, in a *swoon*,—anything but *dead*. DEAD! It is an awful word when applied to the body, but there hangs over it a tenfold gloom when it is employed to describe the condition of the soul. We want to have the means of resuscitation and recovery within. We are willing to admit that we are in prison, no matter how dark and how gloomy is the dungeon, but we must keep the keys ourselves.

"Yes, the human heart, especially if it feels that it is in danger, shrinks from the admission of its entire and helpless moral dependence upon God. It wants to find some life in itself; or at least some spark of a living principle, which it can fan into life. If, then, the churches of our land expect to be revived, and refreshed, and multiplied, during the approaching winter, they must look to God for it;—really and honestly look to God. Every Christian, whatever may be his theory, knows and feels his dependence on God as a fact. He is glad to be reminded of it; and if he seems broken-hearted and submissive to his Savior, seeking help from above, he is in the right frame to expect a blessing upon himself and others.

"How then shall the members of a church obtain this spiritual blessing during the coming season?

"1. The church which desires to be watered from above, ought to bring to an end all its contentions and quarrels. It is probable that the greatest of all the hindrances to the spread of religion in our land, is contention.

"2. Let every individual Christian *explore* and *confess* his sins, and renew the consecration of himself to God's service. Think what the real nature of God's service is, and what is the actual spirit which ought to regulate it. Let every Christian, then, who desires a revival of pure religion around him, look into his heart, scrutinize its principles of action, and bring himself to the right place before God, and to the right feelings in reference to man.

"3. The pastor of a church himself may often err in this respect. There are so many other inducements to lead him to wish for a revival of religion in his congregation, besides the simple desire to promote the holiness and happiness of the human soul, that his heart is exceedingly prone to go astray.

"4. The work which is done, too, should be done in the right manner. There are two very common errors which men fall into in their efforts to promote the salvation of others. One is, to imagine that the Spirit of God is to do all in the work of conversion, and to make accordingly little effort really to reach the intellect and conscience of the sinner, and to adapt, by ingenuity and skill and careful study of human nature, our efforts to his condition. A great many Sabbath School teachers err exactly in this way. They imagine that the Holy Spirit has the whole work to do, in the conversion of children; but as He works only through the truth, they employ themselves in bringing the truth to bear upon the soul, without much consideration as to the way of doing it. New affections and new acts will not come, unless the Holy Spirit supplies the spiritual life by which alone they can be performed. Hence, with all our ingenuity, and energy, and zeal, there must be entire and humble dependence on God; the spirit which would say, God grant repentance and salvation to these lost souls.

"5. This view of the subject is particularly worthy of the consideration of Christian parents, in their efforts to promote the religious welfare of their families. A vast proportion of Christian parents not only do not exercise much skill or dexterity, in endeavoring to awaken religious feeling in their children's hearts, but they do not seem even to imagine that there is room for any. They teach lessons, and impose restraints, and require external duties; and this is all. They think the Spirit must do the rest. Now this would be right if it were true that the first feeling of penitence and love were to be the penitence and love of the Spirit, and not of the child. But it is not so. That little child is to be led to be *itself* sorry for its sins; it is *itself* to love its Maker, and to engage in his service. The spiritual life by which right feelings must be exercised, must be from above. Feel this. Let it humble your spirit while you are at work, and animate it while you are at prayer. It has often been remarked by a pastor who has spent a long life in the experience of the Christian service, that he has never once made the effort to awaken religious interest around him, *in the right spirit*, without success. Persons very often attempt this in the *wrong spirit*, and their efforts result in total failure; but it may be doubted whether a Christian in any sphere of duty, whether the pastor or the humblest member of his flock,—teacher or pupil,—parent or child,—if he shall really humble himself before God, confess his sins, return to his own individual duty, and then sincerely pray for a blessing upon others, and go forth to the work of doing what he can to promote the Savior's cause, will be allowed to labor without success."

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